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Taiga Tales

By
Mary Lile Benham

THE YEAR is 2026. The official photographer leans out of his helicopter. His high-power camera with the telescopic lens clicks. He's in luck. He has just captured on film one of North America's rare northern animals — the caribou. The wolf, wolverine and barren-ground grizzly have been extinct for twenty years. He flies over bare plains of sodden earth which have been exhausted by now-abandoned pipe lines. He arrives at a town whose only industry is government. Government staff dispenses welfare cheques, runs the hospital, the jail, psychiatric and drug addiction clinics. The civil servants live in buildings connected by utilidor. Their clients live in shacks on the edge of town.

OR

THE YEAR is 2026. Fire control has allowed the spruce-lichen forest, beloved by caribou to flourish again. Careful harvest of the animal gives fifteen million pounds of meat a year — a large proportion of which is exported to a protein-starved world. Caribou skins, processed in local tanneries, make the warmest and lightest of all winter wear. Some areas are given over to domesticated reindeer for draft use and milk production. Athapaskan and Inuit villages have their [illegible] medical care, schools and local government. Trapping, fishing, jam factories and lakka (a Finnish liqueur made from cloudberries) supplement the caribou trade. The oil is still in the ground. Canadians have realized that there are alternative sources of energy.

These are the choices for the Canadian North, according to Dr. William O. Pruitt jr., department of zoology, University of Manitoba — a desert haunted by ghosts of bison, passenger pigeon, wolf, muskox, caribou and the Athapaskan and Inuit — or a living, renewing, land populated with real animals and real people.

Change is the only constant. Nature itself is not static but dynamic. If it were not, we would still be living in the dinosaur age. Every year man's ability to effect irreversible changes in the environment is increasing — exciting or alarming though it may be.

Managing the ecology is a tricky business. Protecting one species means giving it priority over others which depend on it. A chain reaction can be set up affecting small animals, insects and plant varieties. Man, one species among many, should ensure that his own survival and comfort do not infringe on the ecological rights of other species. If, along with natural changes, man is going to tinker with the ecology, scientists should accumulate information on what the results of that tinkering may be, and communicate the data to concerned persons.

Research on the preservation of species is best accomplished in wilderness areas, which can be maintained relatively untouched by the meddling hand of man. The idea for the *Taiga Biological Station* (Taiga is a Russian word for the boreal or northern forest) was conceived in the mind of Dr. Pruitt. He was father, mother and mid-wife to this research and teaching area under the aegis of the University of Manitoba.

Dr. Pruitt shoots off sparks when he talks about his 'child'. He is a dynamo of a man — fast-thinking, fast-moving and fast-talking. His sentences spill over into each other as he delivers a running commentary on wolves, caribou, red-backed voles, ('beasties' and 'critters') photo-synthesis and on what wonderful kids his students are. With his fuzzy beard, laugh-wrinkles crinkling, radiating tremendous energy and

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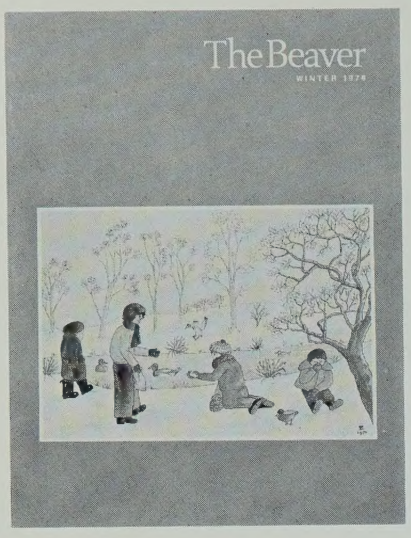

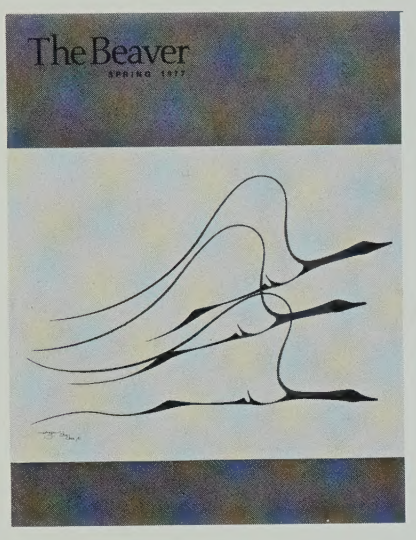

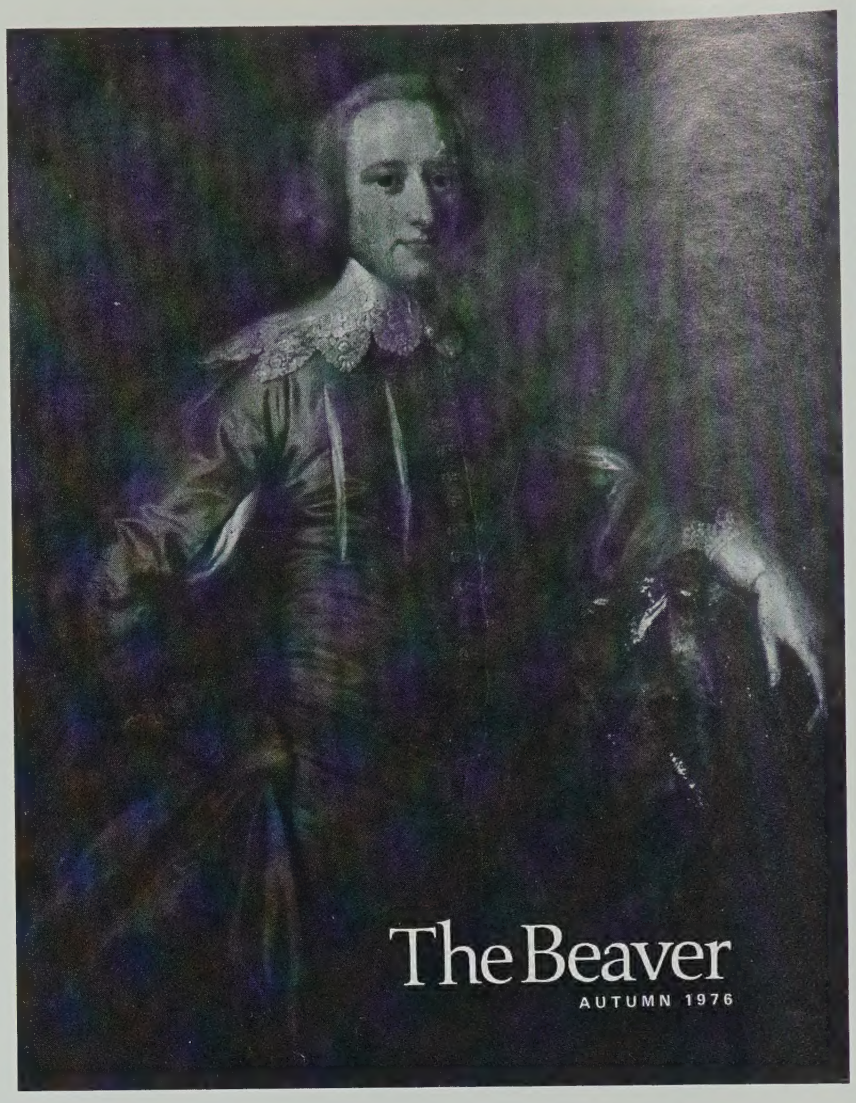

The Beaver

MAGAZINE OF THE NORTH

A quarterly magazine, devoted to things Canadian and to the people and events that have shaped and are shaping the northland.
Well written, illustrated articles deal with various aspects of this country and its Arctic region — incidents of history, exploration, nature, people and development.
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A class enjoys the lunch 'boil up' after a hard morning in the field.

jollity, it would be quite in character to hear him shouting "On Donder and Blitzen" to the reindeer which are his passionate concern.

After many scouting trips Dr. Pruitt hit on the Wallace Lake-Aikins Lake region, an area typical of most of Manitoba — the wheat fields and the cities occupy only a small fraction of the province. This is Precambrian Shield country containing many diverse habitats such as boreal forest, rock ridges, glacial sand flats and bogs. The information compiled here can be extrapolated to the rest of the province. It has one of the highest snow accumulations in Manitoba and is one of a very few wilderness areas with research possibilities left in Canada.

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A hundred-mile drive north and east of Pine Falls brings you to the shores of Wallace Lake. A four-mile trip across the lake and up Blind River takes you to the Station. The river is so narrow, so silted, so mined with half-submerged stumps that the pilot must be skilful. Tall lanky trees lean over the water admiring their silver lichen hairy pelts mirrored there. The forest is jungle-thick but wilderness-silent.

Work on the cabins was started in May 1973 with donated logs which were rafted across the lake and up the river. The logs had to be peeled, measured, marked and hauled up to the crest of the ridge. Dr. Pruitt, with students and volunteers from the Wilderness Youth Corps who "worked their asses off", finished two cabins and furnishings by mid-September. Encouragement and help came from many people in the department of Mines, Resources and Environmental Management.

A workshop has since been added. Last summer an imposing log sauna-cum-washhouse was constructed. When water is frozen or scarce saunas are absolutely necessary for cleanliness, to say nothing of the psychological lift they give. With similar research stations the Finns give the sauna top priority.

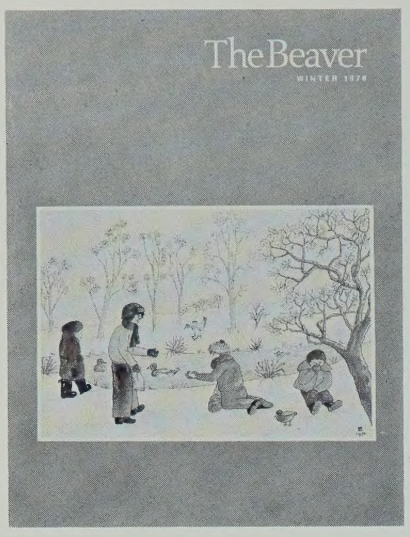
The cabins have windows but they don't open. Windows which will open in summer will frost up in winter according to Dr. Pruitt. A vent over the door and another in the floor allow the air to circulate freely.

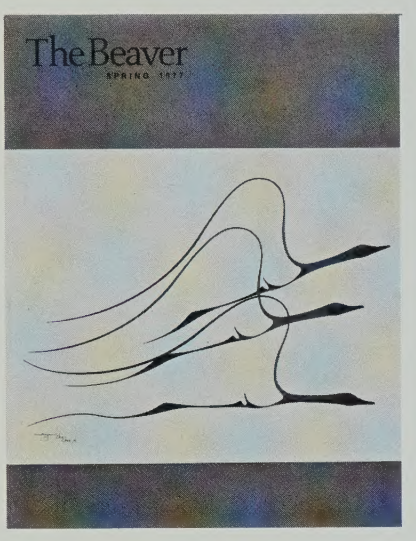
Another quirky idea of his is that the outdoor one-holer be doorless, for good ventilation and because of the biologically-interesting view across the alder bog. It's down the hill and down-wind from the main camp.

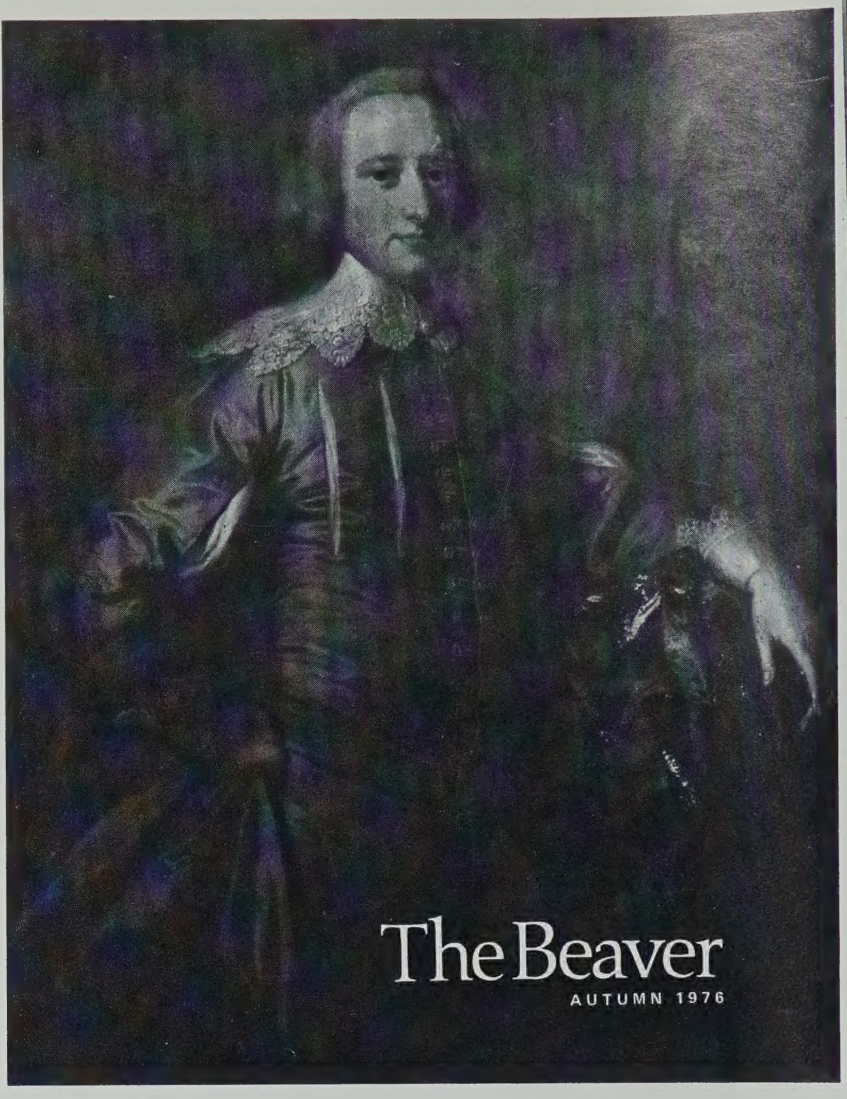
Food supplies are kept in steel barrels, safe from bears, other animals, moisture and fire. All the buildings have foot-thick sod roofs for insulation. In the hot dry summer of '76 whenever the stove was going a constant stream of water was poured on the sod roof because of the fire hazard.

Building all this wasn't easy. Clouds of blackflies and mosquitoes did their bit to make things difficult. All material — logs, sand, gravel, every last nail, had to be hauled by canoe or towed by skidoo across the lake, up the river and up the ridge. Some of the logs needed eight people to lift and carry them. The buildings are not only fully functional, but extremely attractive, blending beautifully into the woodland setting.

You have to be tough to live there. There are two seasons at TBS — July-August and Parka. The camp is deliberately primitive; Dr. Pruitt says: "It has been my experience that the amount and quality of research is in inverse proportion to the amount of glass and stainless steel in the building."







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Official symbol TBS.

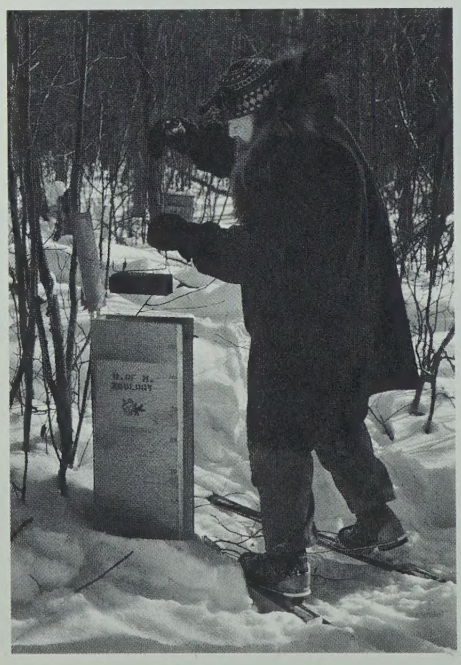
The lab (l.) and the bunkhouse (r.).

Graduate Students Research Projects
Subnivean CO_2 Study

Cheryl Penny, after more than two years' work is now putting it all together in her thesis. She has been monitoring the density of CO_2 under the snow and its effect on small animals.

Her one-acre plots are staked with 'trap chimneys' at intervals. Harmless traps go way below the surface to the subnivean level where the voles and mice scamper about their passageways. Night after chilling night this dedicated young woman crawled out of her snug sleeping bag several times, struggled through the breath-catching cold and knee-deep snow to check her traps, lifting the traps from the 'chimneys' carefully. Crouched in the snow, she cut a left front foot toenail here, a right back one there, as means of identification, then released the animals back to their subnivean catacombs. She could note what density-level of CO_2 they could endure and their mobility-range.

In her long stay at TBS Cheryl became a member of the Bisset community and curled there regularly. The Mouse Girl, as she is affectionately known in the town, made the lonely journey there and back, down the river, across the lake, into town. No matter what time of the night she got home she faithfully checked her chimneys.



William Pruitt lifts a live-trap from a "trap chimney".

From May to September each year Cheryl captured small mammals on her plots, in order to study their summer habits. Along with this went vegetational mapping and analyzing soil samples from the plots that had shown the greatest and least concentrations of subnivean CO_2. All these findings will be available in her thesis. Others can make correlations with large animals studies.

Related to Cheryl's studies are Glenn Sutherland's. He is investigating subnivean invertebrate activity and has found several kinds of insects and spiders are active all winter in the Taiga. .

Wolf

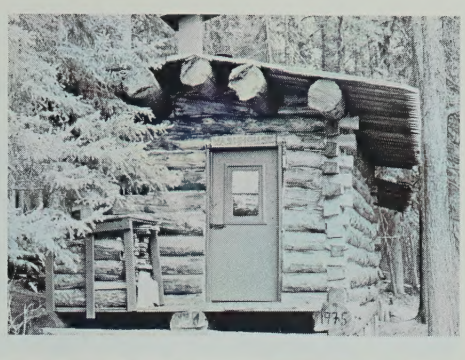
A biased historical jury, without due evidence, has convicted the Big Bad Wolf of song and story of terrorist activity. It has been assumed that a dead moose surrounded by wolf tracks has been wantonly killed by wolves. Tracks of fisher, weasel, mink, jays or chickadees do not condemn them as assassins. The wolf has had such bad press that it gets the nod. A post-mortem reveals a bullet and the fact that wolves have given the wounded animal a swift and merciful death. The wolf has constantly performed valuable service in eliminating ailing, weak, or genetically unfit animals from migratory herds.

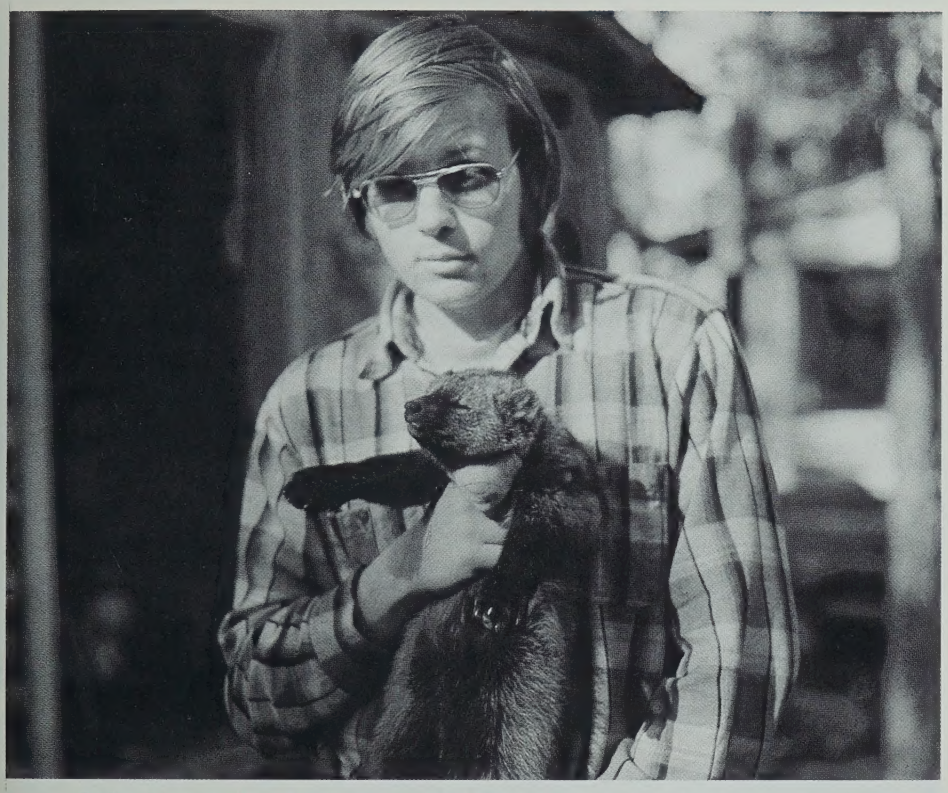
A sociable family creature, the wolf is actually gentle and submissive in its relationship with man. Most captured animals will fight fiercely but the trapped wolf will simply cower, lie still and wait its fate. Pack tradition has taught the wolf to bend the knee to pack leaders and it appears to adopt this master-slave relationship with man.

Wolves are a tourist attraction. In the early Fall, in Algonquin Park, there have been as many as nine hundred cars a night, packed with people who have come to hear a wolf howl and to howl along with it.

Ed Hill's wolf study examined the ecology of the wolf and its relationship to agriculture in various parts of Manitoba. Questionnaires to farmers and ranchers which pin down the reasons for livestock losses reinforce studies in other parts of the continent that wolves are not, in fact, a menace. Never Cry Wolf? — Well — Hardly ever.

The wash-house and sauna building.





Richard Leonard holds a live and snapping female fisher that has just received her radio-transmitter collar.

Fisher

Richard Leonard is gathering information on the food habits, reproduction, age and sex ratios etc. of the fisher, a valuable fur-bearer. He hopes to be able to advise Parks Canada on its possible introduction and management in other areas.

In the '30's, this beautiful animal which looks like a large sleek black cat became almost extinct. One pelt brought in $100, so a trapper might follow a fisher for a week to discover its den. In the 1940's there were only a few of the animals left in Manitoba and restrictions were imposed on trapping. Gradually the population has built up again, but it is still an endangered species. Study is needed to determine its food habits, preferred vegetation-habitat, survival-area necessary — in short, how to 'manage' the animal so that it does not become either extinct or in an improper balance with its prey or predators.

The fisher is too wily to be easily live-trapped. If caught in the conventional trap it will gnaw off the snared foot, enabling it to run free, even if not freely. Richard has had some, but not much, success in capturing it — unharmed of course. Sometimes he can put two traps end to end, give them good snow cover and hoodwink the fisher into believing it is a hollow log.

He has several wearing transitor radio collars. They have been tranquilized in the trap, then collared. This is not easy — they're vicious — it is also costly. The collars are $130 each, the receivers $600. Sometimes the tiny battery gives out before it should or the fisher travels so far afield it is out of receiver-range.

Richard gets his information about food habits by following trails for miles through the snow, collecting and analyzing stools, and from post mortems of the carcasses he buys from trappers who are only interested in the pelts. The fisher can almost "lick its weight in wildcats." It eats animals as large as muskrat, hare or porcupine, showing amazing tolerance for the quills which have been found in its head, heart and liver.

Woodland Caribou

In September, 1970, Richard Stardom camped at the Station Site in a department of geology kitchen-car caboose. Further in the bush he had a tent and three trappers' cabins for his use. He was studying the winter ecology of the woodland caribou, the moose and the whitetail deer.

In order to get at the gourmet ground lichen, caribou make 'craters' in the snow, pawing off the upper layers till they get to the warm lichens. As part of his studies, Richard made vertical profiles of the snow, analyses of each layer.

The explorer David Thompson had an experience with lichen. After shooting a caribou he put his freezing hands in the blood to warm them. "It was like scalding water." The stomach was full of lichen. He traced back to where the animal had been feeding and chewed a bit of the lichen himself. "I swallowed it, and it became like a coal of fire in my stomach."

An endangered species, the woodland caribou calve only once a year and get very edgy if their favourite fawning island or migration route has been invaded by tourists. If and when this area becomes a provincial or national park, buffer zones should probably be set aside for the caribou to pursue the even tenor of their ways.

Apart from an occasional evening with Bill Conley, the trapper, Richard lived alone in the bush with the Taiga site as his main base until June 1972. In the winter he spelled himself off with a week of city lights from time to time. Lonely? Never. It's such a busy life. Traveling long distances tracking caribou, studying, writing up findings, cutting wood, getting water, keeping machinery in operation — staying alive and warm is almost a full-time job in itself. In severe winter it's necessary sometimes to build a fire under the car engine to get the old lubrication going again.

The lab (r.) and the workshop (l.).

Denis Rémillard, Bill Darby and Charles Pruitt with "Cuddles", a woodland caribou fawn that was imprinted on humans.

A woodland caribou buck swims away after receiving his radio-transmitter collar.

Bill Conley demonstrates to a class how to set beaver traps under the ice.

A "Boreal Ecology" class studies the detailed morphology of the snow cover.

Richard Stardom is now the Fur Research specialist for the province of Manitoba.

Bill Darby, a graduate student, is carrying on the caribou research now — numbers, sex ratio, age classes, mortality, productivity, activity pattern and behaviour.

Ear-tagging or radio-collaring the caribou can be exciting. It is necessary to lean out of a 16-foot boat and grab the swimming animal with a sort of shepherd's crook, being very very careful not to meet with a thrashing punitive hoof. Danger-pay is warranted, but is not, of course, forthcoming. Radiotelemetric tracking could be a lot more effective if the station had a tower. One giddy lady caribou keeps traveling too far afield for their range. Two steel fire towers have been donated but they are lying uselessly on the ground awaiting assembly. The required $1500 each is just not available.

The husbandry of caribou (or reindeer) has been neglected in Canada. It could be a valuable source of meat and clothing. Each hair of the animal contains hollow dead-air spaces for insulation and the underfur is closely-grown, very fine wool.

There is a clear correlation between caribou presence and mature forest since the old greybeard spruce are furry with lichen — the skin the animal not only loves to touch but loves to eat. Some of the region was badly burned over in 1948 and is now regenerated but not mature.

The possibility of fire is a constant worry. What sounds like a delightful bird song is the keening produced by two trees rubbing together in the wind. Old bushworkers claim if the wind becomes strong and steady enough this friction can actually produce sparks which trigger a forest fire.

A disastrous lightening-ignited fire occurred in summer 1976 . . . a greedy monster traveling six miles an hour, leaping over water, devouring not only the Station's outlying cabins but everything green in its path for thousands of acres. Luckily the station itself was unaffected. Not a case of Taiga, Taiga, burning bright in the silence of the night.

At any rate, Bill Darby, although it means a lot of moving around, will be able to study animal-vegetation relationship in a recently-burned area, a regenerated area, and an area with trees hundreds of years old.

Bill Conley, a trapper as his father was before him, is an important part of any story about TBS. It is said the whole operation simply could not have got off the ground without his enthusiastic cooperation. His garage is the mainland contact, the storage for Taiga canoes. He himself — the guy who knows the ropes — has been a great help as well as being company for the various hermits who have worked and studied there.

Dr. Pruitt has just completed a sabbatical in Finland — a busman's holiday at a sub-Arctic research station — in Finland. He has spent all his recent summers at Taiga, plus Christmas holidays, spring breaks and intermittent visits. His family, as dedicated to the project as he is, goes along. Undergraduates have benefited from study-periods there, Junior High students have toured the station and young men and women of the Wilderness Corps and their staff have learned to appreciate its values.

How is all this financed? To a large extent by guess and by God. Dr. Pruitt refers to himself as an accomplished beggar. Many companies have contributed logs, fibreglass insulation, Selkirk chimneys, stove pipes, nails, roofing, concrete blocks and work shop. Many individuals and groups have contributed money and goods. Labour has been voluntary. In some cases involuntary-voluntary — canoe trippers or American fishermen stopping to use the radio were persuaded to lift "just a few logs" or "hammer a couple of nails", by-the-by.

Bunk beds are discarded university exam tables covered with foam-rubber slabs, storage shelves for tools are steel cage racks discarded by the Medical School. Mrs. Pruitt had a house-plant sale which yielded enough money to put together the beginnings of a good reference library. Some traps are discarded commercial mink cages. Some are skilfully hand-made with wire springs by Stony Mountain inmates, who also made the Wolf Crest signs for the station.

The University pays all insurance premiums on the buildings and equipment.

Research workers must find their own living costs for that long road to a Masters degree. Families help and most graduates are able to get study grants from National Research Council, Canadian Wildlife Service, Manitoba Naturalists Society, Manitoba Wildlife Federation, Manitoba Department of Mines, Resources and Environmental Management, Parks Canada and the University of Manitoba. Research funds cannot be used for buildings.

Students use their own cars, food costs are charged up to undergraduates at the station for short stints. Financing is rather a shaky business. There is just not enough money to keep the skidoo, the truck, the outboard, the chain saw and other equipment so necessary to the operation, in good working order. They need more canoes and more radiotelemetry equipment.

This is Taiga Biological Station. What good is it?

It has given over three hundred Manitobans a knowledge of field research techniques and of bush living — the ability to survive — to enjoy solitude. It has given all its wilderness dwellers an enhanced appreciation of wild life and the beauties of unmolested nature in lush summer or in the blue snows of winter.

What good is the Station? It doesn't produce a tangible product for the marketplace. It does produce a body of knowledge which could be of priceless benefit to us, to our children and our grandchildren.

The year is 2026. Which scenario have we chosen for the Canadian Arctic, Subarctic and Taiga?

References

PRUITT: *Animals of the North; Tundra Animals; What is their Future? — Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada — 1970; Caribou Crossroads — Nature Canada — 1973; Life in the Snow — Manitoba Nature — 1973; Reports to Friends of the Taiga Biological Station; A Wildlife Philosophy for Manitoba — 1976.*

STARDOM: *Woodland Caribou in the Snow — Manitoba Nature — 1972.*

HOAGLAND: *Red Wolves and Black Bears.*

David Thomspon's Narrative 1784-1812.

■

Books

THE LANDS I AM

By Pat Friesen, BAH/69, 1976. 44 pp., $2.95.

CHANGEHOUSE

By Michael Tregebov, BA/75, 1976. 36 pp., $3.50.

OPEN COUNTRY

By George Amabile, 1976. 36 pp., $2.25.

IN THE GUTTING SHED

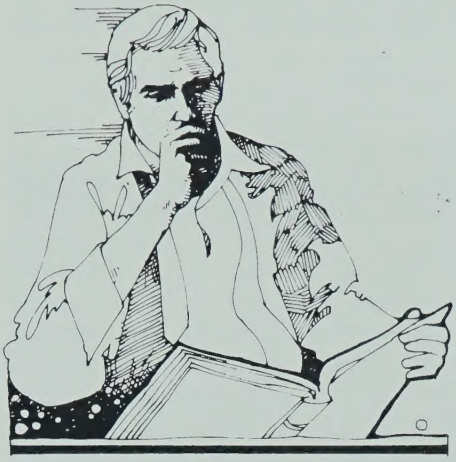
By W. D. Valgardson, BAH/61 BEd/66, 1976. 71 pp., $3.95.

All four books published by Turnstone Press, St. John's College, University of Manitoba.

Reviewed by Dorothy Livesay

Within a year of its start the Winnipeg publishing house, Turnstone Press has produced four books of poetry, three of whose authors live in the City and have been associated with the University of Manitoba. It was just by chance that I sat down to read these slender books in this order: Friesen, Valgardson, Tregebov and Amabile. Having submerged myself I came up for air to find that with Pat Friesen and W. D. Valgardson I had gone back into the prairie past and faced death many times; whereas Michael Tregebov took hold of me with a clutch of steel and steered me firmly into the future. In marked contrast are the poems of George Amabile, involved in the moods of today, exploring the bodily senses, thoughts coming and going like the wind . . . The reader, I concluded, has a wide choice, but by any of these routes he can find poetry to his liking.

Pat Friesen, then, is a man bemused by his past. His most intimate poems are also his most memorable, meditations on scenes and people that have vanished. The picture of the "unlamenting" stoic old man in *"Stoney Land"* is haunting, as are the old people in *"Terrain"* and *"Hard Chair."* Unusual is the poem "fathers die: for J.K.":



fathers die
more suddenly it seems
than mothers

from windows
we have seen the forearms
of fathers straining
with bales of hay
in doorways
we have watched them
planing bone-white boards
curled wood-chips in their pant cuffs

have seen their greasy boots beneath old cars

(oh fathers do not go
without a last touch
do not go forever without sharing now)

Included in this collection, but somehow lacking the same impact are objective poems that show concern for events and deaths not a part of the person's immediate life. Friesen pictures historical figures, such as, "Margaret Wilson," and "Nester Makhno: an archist," and, more lately, John Berryman.

Pat Friesen's cool, detached, low profile in these poems indicates that he uses words sparingly, closely related to English language structure. He spurns the unnecessary, cloying adjective and searches for internal movement from phrase to phrase. The fiction writer, Valgardson, on the other hand employs a more musical and metrical style but takes the easy way out when it comes to searching for the fresh, "right" word. This results in a certain flatness. Sections dealing with a lake fisherman's life are more vivid than the descriptions of prairie landscape; but, throughout most of *In The Gutting Shed* there is a curious lack of immediacy, of commitment. Valgardson is the observer, painting, painting. If an undercurrent of emotion is there, it fails to surface and grab the reader. One has to read half way through this 71-page book before a personality emerges, in poems dealing with pioneer parents and uprooted children. Fewer poems, more carefully chiselled would have made this collection more memorable.

A much younger poet, Michael Tregebov, has straddled these problems. Although an observer also, of himself and others, Tregebov in *Changehouse* presents a sharper, clearer view of the world outside. Whereas Friesen and Valgardson could be called claustrophobic, Tregebov wheels along whistling, enjoying the world, believing there is a future for his generation. Here are the last lines of his poem, "Leaving Winnipeg":

In the early autumn
The trees are still thick with tangles
Out from the airport station
The heavy plane angles
And from the sky at night
I see below there are space stations
flashing morse code:
Regina in the drowsy arms of wheat;
Calgary a cool basilica of wealth;
Vancouver Island, doing the dead man's float
Lookout, I'm going to jump on your back!

Tregebov's poems remain in the memory precisely because he is not a mere imagist; he takes the leap into metaphor and myth:

Look, the boats are moored
Like brocaded geese
The clouds pillar
The summer rain
Knocks on the trees
in a dirge . . .

(Brocaded Geese)

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